Plants OF ALABAMA

Blackberry

Rubus spp.

(Bramble, goutberry, dewberry)

By *Coleen Vansant*, Public Information Manager, Alabama Forestry Commission

There's one thing you can never hide…the fact that you've been in a blackberry patch. Whether it's purple stained fingers from picking them or purple teeth from eating them, there is always undeniable evidence of where you've been. For most people raised in the country, blackberries are just a part of growing up. The deep purple berries are irresistible and more than worth the trouble you go through to get them: fighting briars, bugs, and summer heat for just a handful. Humans are not the only species that enjoy the juicy sweet berries; many species of wildlife and birds also enjoy and depend on them.

Blackberry vines and bushes are native to every continent except Australia and Antarctica. One of the most diverse flowering plants in the world, the genus *Rubus* is very difficult to identify into an individual species because the old natives have intercrossed themselves in the natural state. In the Eastern U.S. there are about 26 different species. Both blackberry and raspberry are in the *Rosaceae* or rose family.

This perennial, sprawling woody shrub produces long arching canes covered with thorns. These canes form dense thickets, as they root when they come in contact with the ground. Above-ground growth begins in two stages. The first year growth (primocane) grows as an unbranched large stem with leaves, but does not bear flowers. The second year growth (floricane) produces a different set of leaves with flowers and fruit. Because it is so prolific, it can become highly invasive. The thorns on the native blackberry plants protect the plant from animals and birds eating the vines before the berry bushes flower and produce fruit.

The blackberry leaves are arranged alternately along the stem with each leaf having three to five leaflets. The compound leaves are heavily toothed on the edges, somewhat prickly and bright green in color. Blackberry and raspberry plants may be difficult to tell apart; however, blackberry leaves are light green on the underside, while raspberries have silvery undersides.

Flowers, appearing in late spring to early summer, are white to pale pink with five petals and many stamens, strongly resembling a wild rose. Blackberry flowers generally have larger petals than raspberries.

Fruit first turns green, and then red, then purple or black as it matures. It is an aggregate of drupelets, elongated and round, sweet and edible. Blackberries retain the receptacle within the fruit at harvest. Fruiting begins in the second year of the plant and continues for ten or more years. Fruit development takes 40-70 days for blackberries and 30-50 for most raspberries.

Blackberry is not really particular about where it grows, tolerating dried conditions and a variety of soil types. It does not like dense shade and will generally occupy old fields and woodland clearings, gradually disappearing as the forest returns. It is also found in gullies, along creek banks, roadsides, fencerows, and forest margins. Blackberries adapt better to the south's hot, arid summers than raspberries.

Some wildlife biologists believe blackberry to be one of the most important naturalized growing plants for wildlife food. It is one of the most abundant soft mast foods due to its succulence, high sugar, and vitamin content. The fruiting cycles of native blackberries and dewberries provide wildlife a supply

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Blackberry

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of tasty and nutritious fruit from spring through late summer. Juicy berries are preferred, but even dried berries left on the canes into fall and winter are eaten. Both game and non-game birds enjoy the fruit including dove, turkey, cardinals, robins, orioles, brown thrashers, red-headed woodpeckers, thrushes, and the towhee. Other animals that like the fruit are opossums, raccoons, squirrels, foxes, chipmunks, coyotes, mice, and black bears. Deer and rabbit browse the stems and tender leaves. Butterflies, bees, moths, and other insects feed on the nectar of the flowers in spring.

As evident in the popular children's tale, "Brer Rabbit," the dense thickets of blackberry canes also provide home and cover for many small animals including rabbits, birds, foxes, and small birds.

Blackberries have long been known for their healing properties. For thousands of years, Europeans have been gathering them from the wild for food and medicinal purposes. The ancient Greeks called the plant "goutberry" as it was used to lessen gout-related joint pain. It is also able to sooth the symptoms of diarrhea. It was believed that crawling through the brambles would cure boils, rheumatism, and whooping cough. Native Americans used the plant to make teas to treat dysentery, cholera, and upset stomach.

Almost all parts of the blackberry plant are edible and can be used for food or medicinal purposes. Rich in vitamin C and other vitamins and anti-oxidants, along with minerals such as potassium, phosphorus, iron, and calcium, the fruit is also a good source of dietary fiber. The berries make excellent jelly, pies, wine, and vinegar. Blackberry jelly and wine were considered fine cordials, especially with the addition of a little brandy.

Young stems can be peeled and eaten raw or cooked and even put into salads. Blackberry tea can help prevent dehydration by replenishing lost fluids, and it can be gargled for sore throats. The leaves can be chewed to cure bleeding gums, as well as for treating inflammation of the mouth and throat. It is also recommended as an astringent.

American Indians made a strong rope out of blackberry stems. The berries, leaves, and roots can dye fabrics any color from yellow to gray, purple, or green. You can even make a writing ink out of the berry juice.

Whether you want to encourage blackberries on your property for your own use or for the local wildlife, there are management practices that you can implement to encourage them on your land. Contact your local Alabama Forestry Commission office or a wildlife biologist for more information.

Managing Shallow Water Areas for Waterfowl

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sprout from seeds in place naturally. Some of these natural foods include smartweed, sedges, barnyard grass, ragweed, and beggar ticks. Japanese millet – closely related to wild barnyard grass – is a cultivated plant that needs no disking. It can be planted to supplement natural foods simply by overseeding mud flats that are created soon after the water has been drawn off.

Common rushes, shrubs, and trees will begin to invade a shallow water area within a few years. For this reason, it will be necessary to disk or herbicide the area to keep these unwanted plants from taking over. This should be done at least once every three years.

Agricultural seed can be planted by those that have the time and money. While corn is popular for ducks, milo tends to be a better choice in many situations. It has nearly the same food value as corn. Milo is also more drought tolerant and less likely than corn to suffer damage from deer, raccoons, and other critters. Chufa, known as an excellent turkey planting, is another good food source for ducks. All three of these choices provide high energy fare for many species. Soybeans, on the other hand, are a poor choice for ducks. They provide comparatively low energy value and also deteriorate very quickly after being flooded. As with any supplemental food source, fertilizer and lime should be applied at planting per soil test results.

Of course, the flatter the land, the better the results when it comes to a cost effective duck management flooding unit. Technical assistance is available by contacting your local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service field office. They can provide assistance with soil maps and soil cores that can help you determine whether your particular spot will hold water without seepage. They can also run a simple waterline to show you exactly how much area your levee will flood. Remember, the average depth will only need to be 18 inches for best waterfowl use.

In the next issue of *Alabama's TREASURED Forests* magazine we will discuss cost-share and easement options available for waterfowl habitat under the Wetland Reserve Program.

This photo shows a flashboard riser water control structure that has been placed in a newly-constructed levee.